Crew Resource Management

Situational Awareness

Assertiveness

Decision Making

Communication

Leadership

Adaptability/Flexibility

Mission Analysis

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By Lt. Erich Roetz

Here I am—airborne, on cruise for the first time in three years, and trying to get night qualified. What can go wrong?

As the mission starts, I realize I'm a little tired. I can't imagine why. Five days ago, I was an FRS instructor on the East Coast. Now, I'm briefing my second flight of the day in the central Mediterranean Sea. Knowing I am near my limits, I ask the aircraft commander (a pilot junior to me by about 1,500 hours) to keep an eye on me.

WHEN LIGH

The mission is uneventful and almost over. We check through strike and into marshal; I had forgotten how quickly they pass the instructions. We start to experience poor weather, as forecasted.

As we head for marshal, my copilot asks for my airspeed. I respond, "200 knots, why?"

He replies, "I'm showing about 150 knots and decreasing." Uh oh, not a good sign.

When his airspeed reaches zero, I think, "No big deal. I've been single-piloted with students at the FRS for the last couple of years."

As we proceed to our marshal point, the weather gets worse. Our storm scope is on, but it is not a true weather radar. Only electrical discharges are displayed, and the scope shows nothing. However, we are getting bounced around pretty good. All I can think is, "Just fly attitude." It is getting darker, and I have no copilot instruments to back me up. It would be nice to have back his instruments.

The next thing I hear from the right seat is, "Hey, look at this," as he points to the windscreen. I see Saint Elmo's fire. Then everything goes white, I hear a huge crack, and the aircraft shakes violently.

I say the first thing that comes to mind, "I can't see."

My copilot then says the first thing that comes to his mind, "Whoa, I can't see either." Not good: Two blind pilots, and only one of us is an LSO.

As my vision slowly comes back, I stay on instruments. I feel I should state the obvious, "We were struck by lightning." Our next task is to determine what still works. After careful scrutiny, we realize we have all of our navigational aids. We then want to see if there is any structural damage, so we dirty up. Everything is going well, but still I can't see very well.

The copilot then exclaims, "Hey, my instruments are back." More good news, I think. Although I am happy his instruments have returned, I would prefer they hadn't come back than to have suffered a lightning strike.

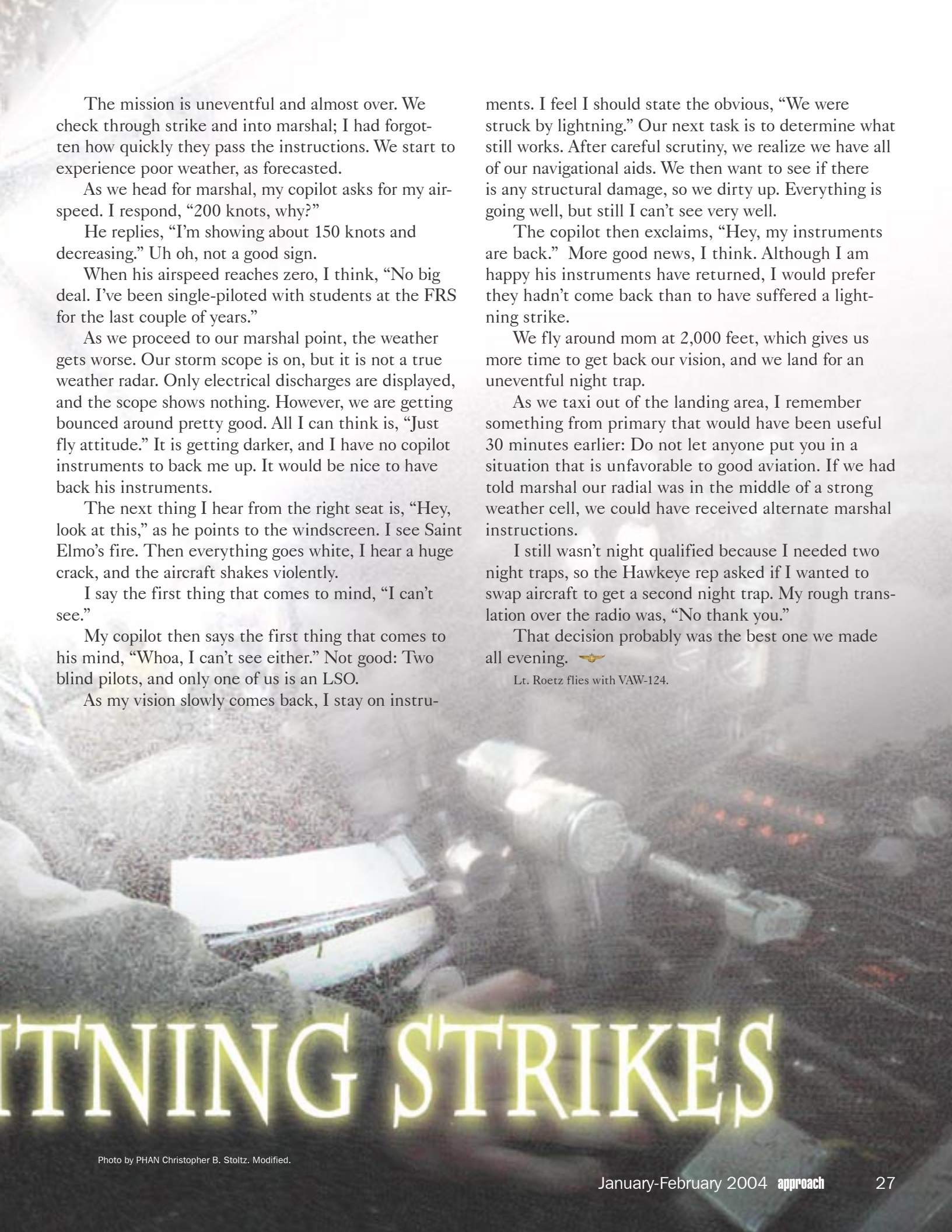
We fly around mom at 2,000 feet, which gives us more time to get back our vision, and we land for an uneventful night trap.

As we taxi out of the landing area, I remember something from primary that would have been useful 30 minutes earlier: Do not let anyone put you in a situation that is unfavorable to good aviation. If we had told marshal our radial was in the middle of a strong weather cell, we could have received alternate marshal instructions.

I still wasn't night qualified because I needed two night traps, so the Hawkeye rep asked if I wanted to swap aircraft to get a second night trap. My rough translation over the radio was, "No thank you."

That decision probably was the best one we made all evening.

Lt. Roetz flies with VAW-124.



TNING STRIKES

Photo by PHAN Christopher B. Stoltz. Modified.